

HERALD

CRANSTON

80 ♦ No. 18

www.cranstonherald.com

Thursday, September 19, 2002

★ Truancy

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Family Court and CCRI team stop truancy

By SARAH SUTTON

CCRI president Tom Sepe calls it "preventative education." Chief Justice Frank Williams says it's "proactive instead of reactive." Family Court Chief Judge Jeremiah S. Jeremiah says it will "help get kids the education they deserve." All three agree that the new "Stop Truancy Outreach Program" (STOP) will succeed.

In teaming with CCRI for a three-year contract, the Rhode Island Family Court will provide services to truant youth and their families, emphasizing the impor-

ance of education and modifying behaviors that could lead to academic failure.

STOP is an extension of the Family Truancy Court. Last year, 480 kids appeared before a truancy magistrate. The program started at Hope High School and has since moved into 20 middle schools in 14 communities across the state. Statistics show significant improvements in attendance rates after court intervention.

According to Jeremiah, students who have attended truancy court show a 20 percent grade improvement and a 71 percent improve-

ment in academic achievement.

At a press conference on Thursday, Sepe said that the community college could further help prevent truancy because "we have experience working with adults who at some point in their lives were these kids."

"There was a time when we didn't need truancy courts," said Williams, "when there was accountability in schools and at home. But our culture has changed, and now we have to

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intervene."

STOP is a four-week, court-ordered program that will run from 8:30-1:30 on Saturdays at CCRI's Knight Campus.

Over the month-long period, students will explore personal interests, discuss how to build self-confidence and think about career plans and the educational path necessary to achieve these goals. Additionally, each student will be teamed with a CCRI student mentor.

At the end of the course, the graduates will receive a certificate of completion. For some students, said Joseph DiMaria, vice president of student affairs at CCRI, it will be the first real credential they have ever received.

"We are emphasizing education as a way to achieve," he said.

According to DiMaria, many students are not truant because of a lack of ability, but because "they just don't feel comfortable with themselves."

"We have a firm belief in the power of education," said Sepe. "It does change people's lives."

For parents, there will be workshops focusing on effective communication techniques, conflict resolution, understanding responsibility and alternatives to punishment.

"Some of these kids never hear their parents say 'you did well' or 'I love you,'" said Jeremiah.

The program, which is funded by a \$230,000 grant, will support 30 kids each session and will begin during the second week of October. Staff will include eight counselors - six for the students and two for the parents. Each four-week cycle will cost \$25,000.

Jeremiah said that statistics show that 90 percent of students who commit crimes are truant prior to their offense and that truancy may be the first sign of an emerging pattern of lawlessness that continues to adulthood. Studies show that truancy is often linked to family issues, including domestic violence or drug abuse.

"I don't think there is another program like this in the country," said Jeremiah.

Next Monday, the program will